



Maine Association of Planners

dedicated to enhancing the practice of community planning

TESTIMONY OF THE MAINE ASSOCIATION OF PLANNERS TO THE JOINT STATE AND LOCAL GOVERNMENT COMMITTEE

SPEAKING IN SUPPORT OF LD 446 “AN ACT TO REESTABLISH THE STATE PLANNING OFFICE”

DATE OF HEARING: March 3, 2021

Honorable Senator Joseph Baldacci, Honorable Representative Ann Matlack, Distinguished Members of the Joint State and Local Government Committee:

My name is Amanda Bunker. I am speaking on behalf of the Maine Association of Planners, as the current President of the Maine Association of Planners, to testify in support of LD 446. The Maine Association of Planners, or MAP, is an organization of over 150 members, including professional public, private, and nonprofit planners, citizen volunteers serving on local boards, and Mainers from other professions like attorneys, landscape architects, professors, and developers. Though our membership works in diverse settings, we are all dedicated to enhancing the practice of planning in Maine.

MAP supports the concept behind this bill, that more meaningful planning resources and policy development is needed at the state level, and that the dismantling of the former State Planning Office has left many critical land use planning service needs unmet in Maine. MAP does not envision recreating the State Planning Office as it was before. We are primarily concerned with the lack of state level land use policy development and reform, and the lack of capacity to provide technical planning resources. The introduction of this bill is an opportunity to reiterate the need for and importance of planning for Maine.

It is easy to overlook one of the most important roles a planner has - to think comprehensively and critically about how everything works together. Land use, transportation, economy, recreation, housing, development & growth, conservation, community health - all these (and more) are interconnected, and changes in one area impact another. And planners do more than facilitate community outreach, plans and visioning, they also facilitate implementation, often taking a critical role in developing the partnerships and finding funding to see the vision through to reality. It is also usually overlooked that good planning has very real public and private financial impacts that can have economic benefits; good land use policies and regulations can help lower municipal costs, reduce public and private legal costs, and reduce private sector investment and development costs. All in all, bringing planning back to state level policy and decision making not only has practical implications, it could help Maine thrive.

In support of LD 446, the Maine Association of Planners would like to offer a few key thoughts on rebuilding planning resources and capacity in Maine. These are issues and priorities that have been heard and discussed over the past few years within MAP, and have been included in our formal communications with Governor Mills and the GOPIF within the past two years. They speak to not only state planning, but also regional and local resources and needs. Determining the best course of action for rebuilding state planning cannot occur without consideration for the overall balance between state, regional, and local planning functions.

Our feedback on rebuilding planning capacity in Maine falls under three headings:

- 1. Revival of Planning at the State level**
- 2. Increased support for Municipal & Regional Planning**
- 3. Strengthen Municipal Planning Assistance Program, and evaluate possible updates to the Growth Management Act**

Revival of Planning at the State level: Land use policy and regulation has impacts across numerous sectors: transportation, economic development, housing, recreation, community health, etc. Likewise, the policy and regulatory activity within other sectors (or state agencies) certainly impacts land use policy and regulation. Further, there is a great unmet need in providing land use regulatory and policy input and resources for the legislature, state agencies, and municipalities. Reviving and rebuilding Planning at the state level offers the opportunity to fulfill several unmet needs: (1) provide technical support for the governor, legislature, state agencies, and municipalities on land use and its interrelation with other sectors; (2) provide a communication “bridge” between state agencies and issues, reducing regulatory and policy conflicts within and between state agencies, and improving efficacy and seeking opportunities for cost savings or other benefits to Maine communities; and (3) aid in both visioning and implementation of state policies and plans, like the Climate Action Plan.

Increased support for Municipal & Regional Planning: Within the context of the implementation requirements of the Climate Action Plan, and given the overall lack of resources and support for municipal and regional planning, increasing technical support and resources for planning at the regional level may prove to be more sustainable in the long-term, as Maine considers rebuilding planning capacity. Currently, regional planning support and resources are inconsistent across the state; but improving and investing in regional planning may be better to support municipal planning needs more directly and effectively than just providing additional support at the state level.

Strengthen the Municipal Planning Assistance Program, and evaluate possible updates to the Growth Management Act: The remnant land use planning assistance office at the state level is underfunded and under capacity, and cannot adequately meet the needs for supporting municipal planning and growth management across the state, let alone meeting other needs for planning at the state level. Despite the heavy requirements for municipalities to establish Comprehensive Plans, meet growth management requirements, maintain their own land use regulations and ordinances, and manage a host of state mandated regulations impacting land use, the current state planning assistance office is woefully unsupported and has very limited capacity to provide municipal support or assistance. This needs to be part of the overall consideration of what staffing and technical support is needed at the state level,

whether under the Governor's office or in another agency. It is also strongly recommended that an evaluation and update of the Growth Management Act (and the process of updating and implementing Comprehensive Plans) be completed in the near term with input from municipalities on its current effectiveness and challenges.

The consideration of reestablishing planning in a meaningful way at the state level needs to be done with a clear understanding of what the planning functions and needs are at state, regional, and local levels, as well as consideration for how planning needs are served through both public and private sectors.

MAP would be happy to answer any questions you may have about our testimony, and would be pleased to work with the Joint State and Local Government Committee as it considers LD 446.

Thank you for your consideration.

Amanda Bunker

President, Maine Association of Planners
<https://nne.planning.org/sections/maine/>